

Articulating the Value of a Credential from a Postsecondary Education Program for Students with Intellectual Disability

By Cate Weir

Non-degree credentials awarded by higher education programs for students with intellectual disability are a relatively new type of postsecondary education credential. While the requirements of associate, bachelor's or master's degrees are widely understood, many people are not as familiar with the educational pathway leading toward these non-degree credentials and may underestimate their value.

Most programs do not award a degree, but rather a non-degree credential reflective of their program of study. Because postsecondary education credential names often reflect the individualized nature of these programs (e.g., Career and Life Studies Certificate), and there may be a lack of knowledge about the curriculum that led to the credential, its value may not be immediately apparent to employers and others.

The value of a credential awarded by a college program for students with intellectual disability on a resume may not be clear to a potential employer—yet. But the value is there, even if it is not currently common knowledge. We must be intentional about educating employers, potential students, and other community members about what it means to earn a non-degree credential from a postsecondary education program for students with intellectual disability so people understand its worth.

By clearly articulating what we know about the learning experiences and outcomes for graduates of postsecondary programs for students with intellectual disability, we ensure that the value of the credential will become more well understood.

College and university programs awarding non - degree credentials to their graduates must articulate the credential's meaning and value to employers and prepare their graduates to do the same. When a student holds this credential, what can employers and others expect them to know and be able to do?

Here are six important facts about these non-degree credentials that can help employers and others understand the value of this type of credential.

1. Comprehensive transition and postsecondary (CTP) programs are a specific type of postsecondary program that include academics, career development, personal skill development, and work experiences.

The Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) (2008) included provisions related to postsecondary education for students with intellectual disability. It defined comprehensive transition and postsecondary (CTP) programs as programs that are “designed to support students with intellectual disabilities who are seeking to continue academic, career and technical, and independent living instruction at an institution of higher education in order to prepare for employment” (Federal Register, Vol. 74, No. 208, Thursday, October 29, 2009, Rules and Regulation. Effective date 7/1/2010).

The programs include college classes, career development activities such as internships and work experiences, and personal and social skill development. Since the HEOA's passage, many programs align their practices with this definition and offer a well-rounded and comprehensive program of study with a strong focus on employment outcomes.

2. Non-degree credentials are not new and have a track record of being valuable.

The term *non-degree credentials* typically refers to certificates, industry certifications, microcredentials, occupational/professional licenses, and apprenticeships.

Research shows that adults with non-degree credentials are more likely to be employed than those without a credential (Valentine and Clay, 2019). Adults with non-degree credentials earn more than those whose highest level of education is a high school diploma, with earnings comparable to those with associate degrees (Hanson, 2021).

Most programs for students with intellectual disability offer at least one non-degree credential, typically a certificate, that is awarded to students as they graduate. These certificates are based on a course of study inclusive of all components mentioned in the definition of a CTP program: academics, career development and work experience, independent living instruction, and structured learning activities in the “soft skills” deemed critical for today’s employees (US Department of Labor, n.d.). Students may also earn other credentials through participation in these programs, such as badges, other micro-credentials, and industry recognized certifications (e.g., ServSafe, CPR, Google IT Professional Certificate, and Certified Front Desk Representative).

Like other non-degree credentials, the program of study leading to a credential from a program for students with intellectual disability is well-rounded and focused on specific career goals and may have the same impact that other non-degree credentials have on the individuals who earn them.

In the 2022–2023 academic year, all students who completed a federally-funded Transition and Postsecondary Program for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID; n = 150) earned at least one credential. Of the completers, 140 students earned a single credential, four students earned two credentials, and six students earned three credentials (Grigal et al., 2024).

3. Higher education programs for students with intellectual disability offer a robust and comprehensive course of study leading to the credential.

Students graduating with a non-degree credential have much in common with those students who graduate with a degree. College students with intellectual disability become college graduates, with a well-rounded, comprehensive college education experience that requires participation in work experiences, college classes, campus-based extracurriculars, growing independence, and improved soft skills. They have proven their abilities and have been evaluated on their learning, just like any other college student, and are held to the same or similar Satisfactory Academic Progress policies that all students at their college or university are responsible to meet. The credential they hold is a concrete indicator of the quality and rigor of their college education.

While not earning a degree, these students have completed a comprehensive college education. They are highly motivated individuals who chose to go on to college to be better prepared for a career and a meaningful life in the community.

4. Graduates have a wide variety of experiences that support success in employment.

Students who complete these programs can be expected to have had varied experiences during their time in college, all aimed at preparing them for competitive integrated employment.

They take college or university courses with other students without disabilities, participate in paid and unpaid work experiences, and learn self-determination skills, such as speaking up for themselves and making choices. Their courses of study also include intentional instruction to support increased independence with skills essential at work, such as accessing transportation, social skills, and time management skills.

These graduates have likely had a variety of work experiences as part of their program of study where they have expanded their skills and abilities through different types of jobs and workplaces. Their studies have intentionally focused on skills critical for today's workplace. For example, graduates have learned to meet academic and work-related deadlines and communicate with peers and supervisors. They have also explored and defined their own career goals.

97% of students who attended a TPSID in 2022–2023 engaged in career preparation activities or employment and 65% had a paid job or work-based learning position (Grigal et al., 2024).

Graduates have participated in a comprehensive discovery process. Discovery is considered a critical first step in the customized employment process; it guides job seekers through a process of finding out who they are, what they want to do, and what they have to offer (National Disability Institute, n.d.). Activities and learning experiences related to discovery are typically part of the curriculum leading to the credential. Therefore, graduates are ready for more advanced job seeking, as they have already completed this discovery process and have had work-based learning experiences, unpaid and paid internships related to their field of interest, and often paid work experience as well.

5. Graduates are ready for continued learning and professional development.

Students who obtain these credentials have also proven that they know how to access higher learning to meet their personal and professional

goals. They have the skills and capacity to effectively engage in training activities on the job. They can revisit or pursue additional postsecondary education or additional non-degree and/or industry-recognized credentials as needs or interests arise. Graduates also have a better understanding of the supports they need to learn, based on their experiences learning in the inclusive setting of a college classroom.

6. Graduates are likely to be more independent and self-reliant.

Many students also experience living on campus, a rich natural learning environment where students learn to be more independent and develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills. These skills will serve them well in the workplace and in their personal lives.

Students in these programs participate in a wide array of non-academic experiences, such as athletics, student government, and campus associations and clubs where they continue to develop their social and independent skills. In fact, these experiences are typically a required component of the course of study. Participating in extracurricular activities on campus provides students with opportunities for personal growth in key areas of social and independent skills.

Graduates of these programs report a high level of satisfaction with their social lives, due to the friendships they make in college and their experiences with a variety of life-enriching activities. These friendships and relationships also offer connections to different workplaces and potential jobs. It is often “who you know” when it comes to getting a job, and these students will have great connections from their years in college.

74% of respondents to an outcome survey sent to graduates of postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability had a paid job one year after completing a TPSID, and 83% reported they were happy or very happy with their social life (Grigal et al., 2024).

Summary

The non-degree credentials awarded by postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability are a new type of higher education credential. These new college and university credentials represent a rigorous, focused learning experience where students are held to standards they must meet to earn that credential, just as more familiar ones do. They represent a dynamic array of experiences and skill-building preparing students for meaningful, competitive work.

It is critical that employers, community members, and others are aware of the hard work and determination that is behind each of these non-degree credentials and understand the tremendous potential of each student who holds one.

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INSIGHT, Issue No. 61, 2024

This is a publication of the Think College National Coordinating Center at the Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston, and funded by the Office of Postsecondary Education (Grant # P407B200001). The opinions contained in this document are those of the grantee and do not necessarily reflect those of the funders.

Recommended citation: Weir, C. (2024). Articulating the Value of a Credential from a Postsecondary Education Program for Students with Intellectual Disability. Think College Insight Brief, Issue No. 61. Boston, MA. University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion.

